A National Agenda for Increasing

Safety Belt Use Among Teenagers

A Project of ACTS

The Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety, Inc. (ACTS) is a nonprofit organization that educates the public and policymakers about traffic safety issues, particularly those associated with occupant restraint systems and other vehicle safety technologies. ACTS develops educational materials, sponsors research and conducts symposia on a variety of highway safety topics, including most recently the 2006 Teen Belt Use Symposium, the 2003 Child Passenger Safety Summit and the 2001 Seat Belt Summit. ACTS also chaired the Blue Ribbon Panels on Child Restraints and Vehicle Compatibility and Protecting Our Older Child Passengers.

ACTS works cooperatively with many other safety organizations and government agencies.

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Authors
Christene Jennings (Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety)
Phil Haseltine (Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety)
Stef Levner (Marketing for Change)
Peter Mitchell (Marketing for Change)

Design
Marketing for Change, Inc.
Joe Rupp (Art Director)

Thank you to the attendees of the 2006 Symposium on Advancing Effective Strategies for Teen Safety Belt Use who contributed to the development of the recommendations.

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PRESS

the set-up

one simple act

IMAGINE A TYPICAL AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL. THE STUDENT BODY IS ABOUT TO VANISH – UNLESS THEY TAKE ONE SIMPLE ACT. BUT THEY DON'T DO IT. INSTEAD OF TAKING ONE SMALL PRECAUTION, THEY DIE.

Sound far-fetched? Perhaps. But consider what's happening to teenagers on America's roads. This year, the equivalent of an entire high school – at least 900 15-20 year olds – will die in motor vehicle crashes solely because they failed to do one simple act: Buckle their safety belt*.

With an easy click, hundreds of teens can save their own lives this year. But if past trends continue as expected, they won't do it.

This report offers a glimpse at why that's happening and how it might change. It is the product of a 2006 symposium organized by the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety (ACTS) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) that brought together a diverse group of policymakers and experts in highway safety, education, teen behavior and technology. The teen belt use symposium, coming on the heels of a NHTSA-sponsored literature and program review on the subject, examined research and program data from a variety of perspectives to identify what showed the most promise for boosting teen belt use. The results include the panel's 23 consensus recommendations and dozens of other insights highlighted in this report about teens, parents and what tends to encourage safety belt use.

Much has already been done. The nation's largest and most effective safety belt intervention, the Click It or Ticket high visibility enforcement effort, has begun reaching teenagers and young adults. Under Click It or Ticket NHTSA and state highway safety offices are now spending more than $30 million annually to boost enforcement of safety belt laws and publicize the threat of a ticket. Since these national campaigns began in 1997, the portion of Americans buckling up in

* NHTSA estimate of teen fatalities that would be prevented if belts were used based on 2004 FARS.

the front seat has increased from 61 percent to 82 percent in 2005.

But while national belt use is at an all time high for adults, teens are still less likely to buckle up. The National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS), which tracks observed belt use in the front seat, splits its sample into four age categories. One age group consistently shows the lowest belt use: 16-24 year olds. In 2005, safety belt use for that age group stood at 78%; other observational studies have shown teen belt use in some areas as low as 50 or 60% (Fell, 2005). The results are deadly. In 2004 alone, 5135 16-20 year olds died in motor vehicle crashes (FARS, 2004); another 456,000 required hospitalization (Traffic Safety Facts, 2004). On average, at least 14 teens die in crashes every day. In 2004, more than half of those killed (58%) were not buckled up.

The simple fact is this: Buckling up is the most effective way we know to decrease fatalities and serious injuries in motor vehicle crashes. This is especially true for teenagers as they have a higher crash risk than other age groups, especially in the first few months of licensure, at nighttime, and with other teen passengers. The crash rate per mile driven for 16-19 year olds is four times that of older drivers (Allstate, 2005). What's more, this deadly combination of low belt use and high crash risk is worse in certain populations: Among fatally injured teens, belt use is lower for males, drivers of SUVs, vans or pickup trucks, and drivers on rural roadways.

Enacting primary enforcement safety belt laws and high visibility enforcement programs like Click It or Ticket that pair primary enforcement safety belt laws coupled with high visibility enforcement have been effective strategies for increasing belt use across all ages. But the symposium's panel felt that laws and enforcement alone can not be expected to boost teen belt use to 100%. Despite, or perhaps because of, the difficulty in getting more teens to wear safety belts, thousands of volunteers and professionals have been diligently seeking other solutions.

There are literally hundreds of programs across the country aimed at reducing teen crashes. Unfortunately, few of these programs have been evaluated to determine their impact, particularly in answering the bottom line: Did this program increase the number of teens buckling up? Evaluating more programs to help us understand what works and what doesn't is one of the symposium panel's top recommendations.

In 2004, 5135 16-20 year olds died. **456,000** more were injured in motor vehicle crashes.

One key to reducing teen motor vehicle fatalities is discovering what might encourage teen belt use, and then applying that approach on a larger scale. Much remains to be learned, but at this point, the panel feels the following approaches show the most potential:

- Launching teen-oriented programs with a variety of components, including carefully selected public policies, high-visibility enforcement of safety belt laws, and communications and marketing strategies.
- Expanding the parental role in influencing teen driving and safety belt use.
- New vehicle technologies, particularly enhanced safety belt reminder systems, are relatively untested for teens but have increased usage for adults.

NHTSA plans to use the symposium's findings, as well as other information, to develop a toolkit that will help communities develop more effective interventions. In the meantime, a number of tips for community programs are included in this book.

This report highlights some frightening statistics, but ultimately it is a story of hope. In a world in which teens face many risks, few can be so easily reduced as the risk of dying in a car crash. Thousands of teenagers are one simple click away from saving their own lives. Our challenge as a nation, given that motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of teen death, is to help make that click a habit. What follows is the expert consensus on how to do so.

Roadblocks to Buckling Up

Although safety belts, if worn, reduce the chance of being killed in a motor vehicle crash by 50% or more, there are pervasive obstacles to increasing teen belt use:

- Gaps or loopholes in state belt laws.
- Inconsistency in law enforcement.
- Lack of parental involvement and control.
- Risky behaviors and immaturity in teen drivers.

the challenge

teenagers unrestrained

WHAT IS IT ABOUT TEENAGERS? THEY ARE GROWING OLDER, SMARTER, STRONGER AND MORE MATURE. THEY ARE FINALLY CRAFTING THEIR OWN IDENTITY. THEY ARE INCREASINGLY ACTING MORE INDEPENDENT. AND WHILE THEY MAY BE MUCH FURTHER FROM ADULTHOOD THAN THEY CLAIM, THEY ARE CERTAINLY MOVING IN THAT DIRECTION.

So why are teens the most unlikely age group to buckle up? Indeed, why is a 16 year old less likely to wear a belt than a 10 year old?

The simple answer seems to be this: Teenagers are changing. They are in a time of transition, a period when previously safe behavior is questioned and risk-taking brings on a new thrill. In fact, new research suggests that teens have less control over their actions and are less capable of consistently using sound judgment than previously thought. Rather than reaching maturity by the teen years, scientists now believe that the human brain is not fully developed until age 25 (Weinberger, 2005).

So even though today's teens are a generation brought home in infant seats, buckled as toddlers in child safety seats, and raised (for the most part) under mandatory safety belt laws, many are still riding unrestrained at any one time.

Most know the basic safety message – that belts save lives. That's a message that's surrounded them practically since birth, emblazoned on traffic signs and dramatized in school assemblies. Vince and Larry, the widely recognized crash test dummies from Buckle Up America, had been preaching belt use for just over a decade by the time today's 15-year-old entered kindergarten.

This is why most experts agree there is a need to reach beyond yesterday's safety message. The first step in designing a more effective national strategy promoting teen belt use, they say, is to better understand what being a teenager is all about.

Why Is Risk Attractive to Teens?

"The combination of an incompletely developed capacity for decision-making, the impulsiveness and stimulation-seeking characteristic of teenagers, their heightened sensory impulses and their relative emotional volatility – all occur in the context of a culture that is replete with enticing portrayals of risky behavior."

(National Research Council, 2006)

The opportunity is there. Physicians, behavioral psychologists and other scientists have produced a wealth of new information about teenagers and their development, creating a whole new window into this in-between stage of life. What's more, this information is widely available outside academic circles, filling web pages on the Internet and explained in laymen terms by popular authors. (Consult the Appendix for a list of helpful reading materials and web sites.)

Of course, not everything we know about teenagers is directly linked to traffic safety. But it is clear that the following factors should be considered when designing teen belt use interventions:

Peer pressure is important, but it does not negate parental influence. As children enter their teenage years, they increasingly look to peers for guidance about how they should act. But parents remain a major influence on most teenagers' lives, perhaps a greater influence than most parents suspect. Traffic safety policies and programs can help parents wield this influence more effectively. Interventions can also use peer pressure to encourage belt use, especially when perceptions about how many teens use safety belts don't mirror reality.

Teen brains are still developing. The last area of the brain to develop is the prefrontal cortex, home of the executive functions of planning, setting priorities, suppressing impulses and weighing the consequences of one's actions. This region also handles abstract information and is critical for learning such concepts as rules, laws and codes of social conduct (Weinberger, 2005). This is the part of the brain that eventually will make a teen more responsible, but we now know it continues to develop well after puberty and is still a long way from complete even as teens first get behind the wheel of a car. Traffic safety program managers shouldn't be surprised that teenagers sometimes act erratically and can change their mind about belt use habits they once took for granted; this is to be expected.

Teenagers are natural risk takers. The yearning to take risks – not to be safe – is quite literally flowing through every teenager's body in the form of hormones their brains are still learning to control. Teens tend to seek out experiences that cause their passions to run wild. It contributes to their tendency to thrill-seek and take risks. This is why appeals that frame safety belts simply as a safer behavior may resonate less with teenagers than with other groups.

The mass media holds enormous sway with many teenagers. Some researchers have even gone so far as to argue that TV and movies are the equivalent of a "super-peer" with significant influence over how teens perceive the world. Beyond portraying safe driving behaviors, traffic safety advocates must battle the billions of dollars spent in portraying risky driving behaviors in the plethora of media that assault us on a daily basis. Teens have a more intense relationship with media today than at any time in the past. Eight to eighteen year olds spend an average of 44.5 hours per week watching TV, playing video games, instant messaging, listening to music, etc. This is more time than they spend with their parents (17 hours) or at school (30 hours)(CDC, 2000).

Adolescent Development and Traffic Safety Strategies

In order to increase belt use for teens, traffic safety professionals must consider adolescent development issues and stay abreast of new research in this evolving field.

These current traffic safety strategies are based on adolescent development research:

Graduated Driver Licensing

Guidance from adults is essential while the decision-making process is maturing. Graduated driver licensing (GDL) systems are designed to provide teens with guidance to improve their decision-making skills and to gain competence (See page 18 for more information on GDL systems.).

Enforcement

The consequences for not buckling up can be substantial. Teen driving behaviors are among the most important health and safety behaviors parents and law enforcement can influence. Since teens are often not developmentally ready to fully grasp consequences on their own, enforcement of the laws, whether via police officers or parents, is important.

Peers/Education-Only Programs

A critical factor in making decisions about belt use centers on what teens think their peers are doing. Many programs have begun involving peers in an effort to better understand teen thought-processes. While having a "teen perspective" by learning more about teens from teens may be useful in helping to design interventions, peer-led programs may offer more promise than peer-created programs. In addition, strategies that rely on simply giving teens "the facts" are unlikely to reduce risk-taking, which we know is a common characteristic of teen life. Not surprisingly, educational efforts alone have been largely unsuccessful.

Social Norms

Because teens are particularly sensitive to the actions of their peers, social norms marketing, which is based on the premise that behavior is influenced by perceptions of what is "normal" or "typical" has the ability to impact teens. To date, few social norms programs have been specifically targeted toward belt use, but some impaired driving youth programs utilizing social norms messaging have been successful.

Most teens are poor drivers. The vast majority of fatal crashes involving teens result from driver error. The combination of driver inexperience, a propensity to take risks behind the wheel and an attitude of invincibility add to the challenge of trying to change the behavior of this age group. In order to increase belt use for teens, traffic safety professionals must consider adolescent development issues and stay abreast of new research in this evolving field.

Most teenagers are sleep deprived. A serious concern of those who study adolescence is teen sleep-deprivation, which may result in significant impairment of cognitive function and emotions that lurch out of control. Because of rapid growth and development, teens need more sleep than younger children and adults, yet their circadian rhythm shifts slightly toward staying up later at night and most still need to rise early for school. This is why teenagers typically sleep late on the weekends. More sleep could mean better decision-making, and potentially, more buckled up teens (National Sleep Foundation, 2000).

Not surprisingly, a teen's focus is not typically on questions of traffic safety, but on mobility. A car represents freedom, excitement, socialization, companionship and all-around entertainment. It is not likely that any message campaign will succeed in altering that relationship.

Instead, traffic safety policies and programs should be designed to leverage what teens value. A national strategy to increase teen belt use that fails to understand the natural and typical teen experience is doomed to failure. Success depends on recognizing reality, and adjusting our national strategy to take advantage of what we know.

the agenda

Strategies for Increasing Teen Belt Use

AS THE NUMBER ONE CAUSE OF DEATH FOR 16-20 YEAR OLDS, MOTOR VEHICLE CRASHES ARE A HEALTH CONCERN, LIKE A DEADLY VIRUS RAGING THROUGH THE AGE GROUP. BUT THERE IS NO ONE VACCINATION OR CURE. THERE ARE MANY. THIS IS A MIXED PRESCRIPTION.

Raising teen belt use will require initiatives addressing legislation, enforcement, parenting, technology, marketing, communications and research. It will mean encouraging national and local programs to develop comprehensive strategies that draw on a variety of methodologies and approaches. Some initiatives, such as primary belt laws, can be uniformly applied while others, like communication and marketing, need to fit the region and population being addressed. Any national agenda targeting teenagers is also bound to be a fluid one, as proponents should constantly be digging for new insights, receptive to new ideas and committed to evaluating everything being tried.

What follows are recommendations, grouped by subject area, that are based on what we know right now, and some of the thinking behind each suggestion. These ideas, taken together, represent the nation's best shot at making safety belt use at least as common among teenagers as it is with everyone else.

legislation & enforcement

RECOMMENDATION #1

All states should enact primary enforcement safety belt laws covering all passengers in all seating positions in all vehicles.

RECOMMENDATION #2

State and local law enforcement agencies should conduct periodic high visibility enforcement programs that include enforcement of occupant protection laws. Nighttime enforcement in areas where teens congregate has the potential to encourage compliance and higher usage.

Laws that mandate safety belt use, especially those that empower police officers to pull over violators, have contributed to dramatic increases in belt use in recent years. Mandatory belt laws, now covering teens in every state, are the backbone of the nation's Click It or Ticket strategy. The strategy, which combines high-intensity enforcement with high-profile publicity, raises the perceived risk associated with failing to wear a safety belt: Not only is one more at risk in a crash (a rare occurrence), one faces the more likely possibility of getting a ticket.

NHTSA is still studying how well the strategy works with teens. However, just as overall belt use has risen during Click It or Ticket campaigns, so has youth belt use. It only seems sensible to continue expanding and strengthening these efforts. Many states can boost the perceived risk of a ticket by enacting "primary" safety belt laws which allow police to pull over violators rather than only issuing tickets to unbelted drivers and passengers pulled over for other reasons (secondary enforcement). Half of the states only allow secondary enforcement. In general, fatality rates are much lower in states with primary enforcement laws than in secondary enforcement states (Liu, 2006). Meanwhile, almost every state's belt use rate has benefited from engaging in high-profile enforcement efforts like Click It or Ticket (Solomon, 2004).

Enforcement efforts can also be tailored more to teens. Belt law enforcement efforts can be coupled with those directed at speed laws, impaired driving and other other traffic laws. They can be conducted at night, a time when teens are particularly at risk.

High school driving/parking programs have also shown promising results when initial belt use was low (Williams, 2003). However, this approach needs to be more fully evaluated before it is recommended for wide-scale adoption.

There is also this caveat: Enforcement is critical, but it is not the complete solution. History shows as much: Even as Click It or Ticket was embraced as a national strategy in 2004, belt use among 16-20 year olds remained 5 percentage points below the general rate in fatal crashes, according to NHTSA's Fatality Analysis Reporting System. Clearly more is needed.

Safety Belt Law Essentials

Safety belt laws aim for universal voluntary compliance and are not designed just to write tickets.

- Create laws covering all motor vehicle occupants in all seating positions.
- Establish meaningful penalties for violators – fines comparable to other traffic offenses and driver license penalty points.
- Allow police officers to ticket violators without observation of a second infraction -- primary enforcement increases the perceived threat of observation and encourages voluntary compliance.

Primary Enforcement Safety Belt Laws
What Opponents Say and Why They Are Wrong

As of June 2006, 25 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico had primary enforcement belt laws, permitting officers to ticket for belt violations just as they can for any other traffic infraction. The remaining states (except New Hampshire, which only covers to age 18) have secondary enforcement belt laws, requiring a second observed violation before pulling someone over. Not surprisingly, most states with primary enforcement have higher belt use. In 2005, belt use was ten percentage points higher in primary law states (NOPUS, 2005), and when states change from secondary to primary enforcement, belt use generally increases by 11 points or more within the first two years.

Opponents of primary enforcement laws argue that buckling up is a personal choice or that primary enforcement increases racial profiling by police. The truth of the matter is:

- All traffic laws impose some degree of control on individuals.
- It is harder for unbelted drivers to control their vehicles in an emergency situation..
- Unbelted vehicle occupants frequently get thrown around in the vehicle, causing them to injure other passengers during a crash.
- The costs of injuries and fatalities in traffic crashes are borne by all taxpayers.
- Studies examining the effects of new primary enforcement laws in Louisiana, Georgia, Maryland, Oklahoma and the District of Columbia found that police harassment and racial profiling did not increase after the laws were enacted (NHTSA, 2003).
- Courts have consistently upheld the government's legitimate role in regulating safety on our highways. A 1972 Massachusetts case affirmation by the U.S. Supreme Court stated: "From the moment of injury, society picks the person up off the highway; delivers him to a municipal hospital and municipal doctors; provides him with unemployment compensation if, after recovery, he cannot replace his lost job; and, if the injury causes disability, may assume the responsibility for his and his family's continued subsistence. We do not understand a state of mind that permits a plaintiff to think that only he himself is concerned." (Simon v. Sargent, 1972)

"From the moment of injury, society picks the person up off the highway"

Cop to Cop:

A Police Officer's Views on Enforcing Safety Belt Laws

If your agency is anything like mine, you are probably bombarded on a daily basis with new orders from commanders and the "crime of the day." You've got fourteen hours of work and the last thing you need is something else to think about. And like my jurisdiction, you have probably suffered several teen traffic fatalities or serious injuries in the last year. How can you do your part to reduce teen injuries and deaths without going into overload?

» If you have a Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) law in your jurisdiction, make sure you understand it. If you don't know the law, you can't effectively enforce it. Most GDL laws restrict the times during which a teen can drive and the number of passengers they can carry in a car. Some of these laws also mandate belt use for all passengers in a teen's car.

» Try running a checkpoint or saturation patrol near high schools at lunchtime. This is a great time to enforce belt, GDL and other traffic violations. High visibility enforcement around nighttime hangouts is also a great method of letting teens know the consequences of their actions. I guarantee you will also find some alcohol and drug violations in these locations.

» Don't let it go. How many times have you been "too busy" to stop that seat belt violator? Me too -- we all have, and we were wrong. Crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers. Make the traffic stop, write a ticket, give a warning, call the parents. Do something.

Can we ever stop teenage fatalities and injuries? YES. To believe otherwise is to give up. It may not happen in my lifetime or your lifetime, but we can do it.

Follow these suggestions and save a life. Like so many things you do as a law enforcement officer, you may never know the difference you have made, but to do nothing is to invite teen traffic deaths into your jurisdiction.

Sergeant Tim Tomczak
Crash Reconstruction Unit
Raleigh, NC Police Department

RECOMMENDATION #3

Graduated driver licensing (GDL) systems designed to help parents protect teens, frequently have provisions that prevent beginning drivers from moving to the next licensing stage if they violate traffic laws. Only a few states now include safety belts in the list of violations affecting license status. Licensing consequences for safety belt violations have the potential to increase teen belt use and should be integral components of GDL systems.

RECOMMENDATION # 4

Law enforcement training curricula should be modified to include additional information related to teen driving safety issues, including the critical importance of enforcing belt use laws and GDL. Additional information on the specifics of restraint use laws and recent statutory changes should also be incorporated.

Graduated driver licensing (GDL) systems are designed to reduce the risk of crashes for young, inexperienced drivers. While GDL systems vary considerably from state to state, the more complete systems include the following elements:

- A learner permit requiring adult-supervised driving.
- A minimum waiting period (usually 6 months) before applying for an intermediate license.
- A required minimum level of supervised driving (typically 30 to 50 hours).
- An intermediate level license with nighttime and passenger restrictions.
- A full, unrestricted license, usually available after 6 months with an intermediate license.

The requirements for graduating from one licensing level to the next also vary from state to state. Citations for violating traffic laws and traffic crash involvement can delay advancement to the next level. A few states include belt law violations among the traffic offenses that can delay advancement in licensing status.

A 2006 study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health concluded that GDL systems reduce the incidence of fatal crashes involving 16 year old drivers by an average of 11 percent. The study's authors concluded that the most comprehensive GDL programs result in the greatest reduction in fatal crashes involving 16 year old drivers (Baker, 2006).

Structural Impediments to GDL Belt Use Provisions

Some state belt laws specifically state that violations cannot be recorded on a person's driving record. GDL provisions that affect the license status of novice drivers ticketed for not wearing a safety belt can only be effective if the citation is recorded and the appropriate licensing action can be taken.

Effect of Safety Belt Restrictions as a Component of GDL

Many safety professionals believe that well-publicized and enforced safety belt provisions within state GDL laws would increase belt use among young drivers, because they would not want to risk receiving a citation that could result in a fine or delayed "graduation" to their intermediate or full license. However, there currently is little real-world experience with GDL-related safety belt restrictions. At least two state pilot programs are currently being evaluated. States would be well-advised to await these results before implementing similar programs.

What Law Enforcement Professionals Should Know About GDL/Safety Belt Use:

- Law Enforcement professionals should familiarize themselves with the Graduated Driver License (GDL) and related belt statutes in their jurisdiction. Restrictions are typically based on licensing level, time of day and limitations on carrying passengers.
- Age matters. The crash rate per mile driven is twice as high for 16 year olds as it is for 18-19 year olds. (IIHS Fatality Facts, 2004: Teenagers)
- In 2004, 58 percent of people ages 16-20 that died in crashes weren't wearing a safety belt.
- In states where nighttime GDL restrictions are in place, crashes have been reduced by as much as 60 percent during restricted hours.
- School Resource Officers can effectively encourage teens to buckle up when arriving at and leaving school.

parental involvement

RECOMMENDATION #5

Parents need to set a proper example for their teens by always buckling up and requiring all passengers to be restrained.

RECOMMENDATION #6

Parents should make it clear that they expect their teens and their passengers to buckle up.

RECOMMENDATION #7

Parental involvement should be part of community and high school safety belt use programs. Roles might include belt use monitoring, establishing rules and consequences for not buckling up.

RECOMMENDATION #8

A toolkit that includes specific tips, guidelines and expectations should be developed to assist parents in talking effectively to their teens about belt use and in establishing belt use rules.

RECOMMENDATION #9

State GDL programs should require parental involvement at the initial stages of licensure and provide an easy-to-apply mechanism for parents to suspend licenses or keep their teen from graduating to the next licensing level.

As with so many other teen behaviors, parents play an influential role in whether their teenage children buckle up. They serve as role models, educators, rule-setters and, in a sense, as marketers. Few other adults, after all, are better positioned than parents to offer teenage children enticing offers in exchange for buckling up.

Unfortunately, parents too often feel powerless or ill equipped to change their own child's behavior once the teen years arrive and a new spirit of independence, and sometimes rebellion, emerges.

Traffic safety policies and programs can help parents use their untapped power to become another force ensuring their children buckle up.

Specifically, parents can be encouraged, supported or better equipped to:

- Act as role models by wearing their own belt on every trip. Several studies have found that when parents ride restrained, their children are more likely to be buckled up.
- Educate their teenage children, not just about the safety benefits of belts but on the risks of getting a ticket if they or other passengers fail to wear one. Teens are more likely to listen than many parents believe. Nine out of 10 teens said their parents have the most influence on their driving in a recent survey by the Allstate Foundation.
- Establish and consistently enforce strict rules requiring everyone in a vehicle to be buckled up on every trip. Teen drivers should be required to adhere to this rule as a condition of driving.

Many traffic safety programs already encourage parental involvement. Many states require written parental permission for a teen to obtain a driver's license. State graduated driver licensing systems, which typically require a period of supervised driving, provide additional opportunities for parents to influence their teen's driving behavior. Given the important role parents can play to influence teen belt use, educational information should be developed for parents to help make their job easier.

Advice for Parents

Parenting isn't easy. But there's help: a pilot program at the National Institutes of Health developed the following tips to help parents encourage belt use with teens:

» Be a role model. Always wear your safety belt and require everyone in the vehicle to buckle up before putting the vehicle in gear.

» Put some rules in writing. Written rules have a much more powerful effect on behavior than rules that are only spoken.

» Repeat yourself. Frequent communication is important because teens do not always remember or appreciate what parents say only once or twice.

» State your reasons. Teens understand and appreciate rules that they believe parents have established in the teen's best interest. So, be sure to explain that these rules are important because you care about your child and not because you don't trust him or her.

» Even "good kids" need guidance. Many parents fail to emphasize safety belts and risky driving sufficiently with their teens because they perceive them to be "good kids." However, part of learning a complex new skill like driving is making mistakes. To minimize the potential effects, parents must be sure that their teen understands the importance of belt use.

And if your child is a new driver . . .

As if parenting isn't tough enough, there's the challenge of developing a young driver. Some helpful tips:

» Ensure good habits are developed early. Supervised practice driving is a time for developing good habits, so insist on belt use every time.

» Set clear conditions. Prior to each stage of licensure, parents should go over their rules for teens and the privileges they will be allowed and the limits on their initial driving privileges. Among the essential requirements are:

- No taking drugs or alcohol;
- No speeding, tailgating, weaving in and out of traffic, or other risky driving behaviors;
- Obey traffic laws and signs;
- Always wear a safety belt;
- Always insist passengers wear a safety belt before putting the vehicle in gear.

Remember, you're in charge. Getting a license is a privilege allowed by the state and by parents. Getting a license means that teens can manage the vehicle, not that they are safe drivers. In fact, newly licensed teens have very high crash rates for a time right after licensure while they learn how to manage traffic, recognize hazards and react safely. Crash rates decline rapidly for about 6 months and then less rapidly for another several years while drivers gain experience, while their driving performance and decision-making skills gradually improve.

Bruce Simons-Morton, EdD, MPH,
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

technology

RECOMMENDATION #10

Vehicle manufacturers should continue to develop and install belt reminder systems on new vehicles.

RECOMMENDATION #11

Manufacturers of aftermarket belt use monitoring systems should design them to monitor belt use by passengers as well as by drivers.

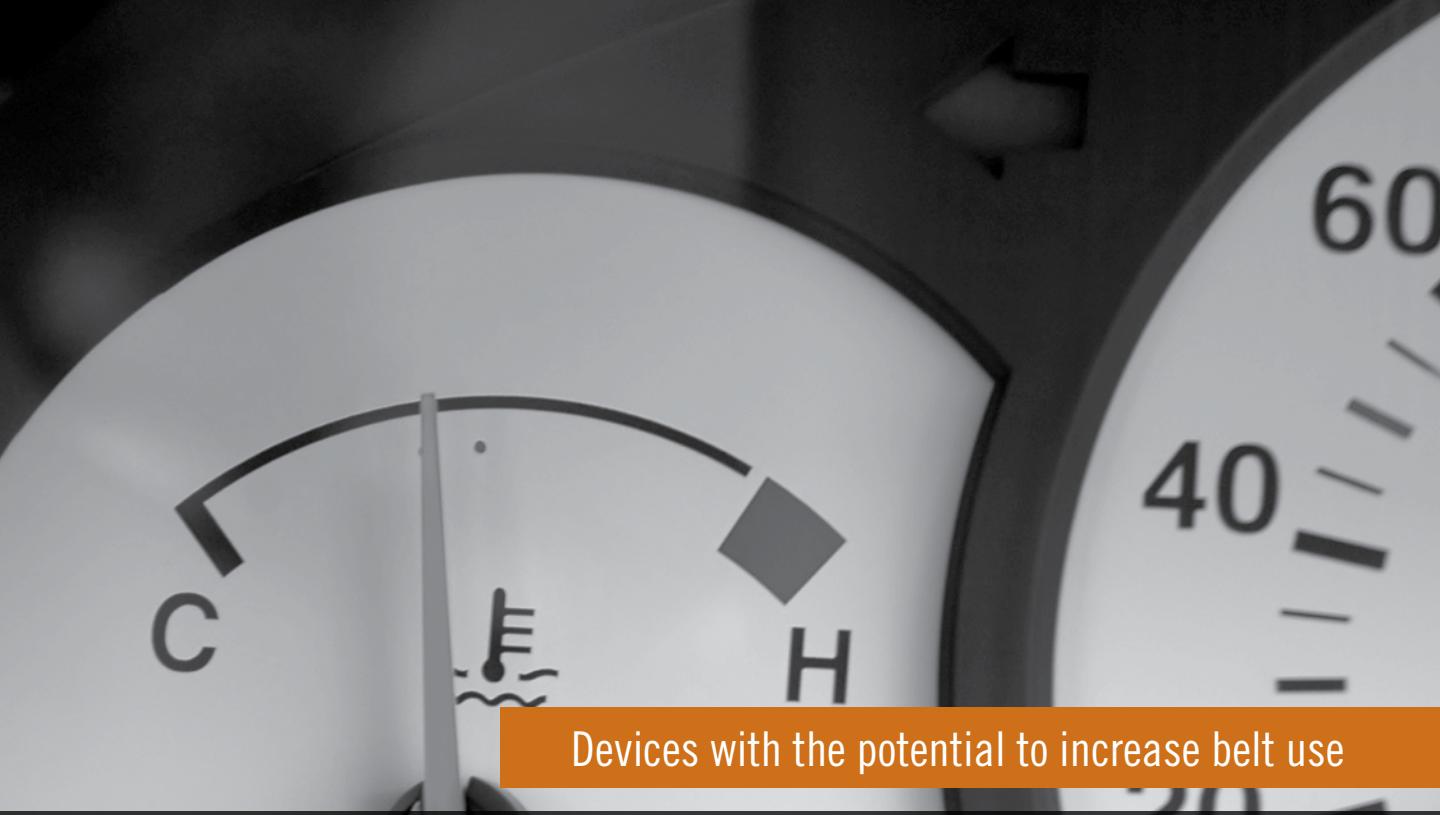
The toughest challenge for any new vehicle technology is the unpredictable and temperamental component with which it must interface – a human.

To encourage belt use, reminder systems must be sufficiently intrusive to trigger use, but not so invasive that drivers seek to disable them. It's been a delicate balance. In the early 1970s, federal rules required all passenger vehicles not equipped with air bags (none were at the time) to have interlock systems preventing engines from starting if front seat occupants were unbuckled. Drivers rebelled. Strong public opposition led Congress not only to reverse the rule but also to prohibit mandatory ignition interlocks or continuous buzzer warnings longer than eight seconds.

The Congressional ban is still in effect. The eight second warning systems installed in vehicles since the mid-1970s have had little or no demonstrated effect. However, starting with the Ford Motor Company in model year 2000, automakers began voluntarily installing enhanced reminders beyond the NHTSA-required four to eight second systems. These enhanced systems vary from manufacturer to manufacturer, but there is evidence that they contribute to higher safety belt use. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has found belt use increases of five percent or more when the systems are installed. While the effect of these systems on teens has yet to be determined, some safety experts believe audible warnings may be successful in getting more teens to buckle up.

Beyond warning lights and buzzers, potential vehicle technologies to encourage safety belt use include devices that prevent the radio from playing or prevent the vehicle from moving if safety belts aren't worn. While NHTSA cannot require these technologies, they could be installed voluntarily and several such devices are in various stages of development. However, surveys by NHTSA and the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety suggest aggressive reminder systems that interfere with entertainment or climate control systems would be met with heavy consumer opposition (ACTS, 2001 and TRB, 2003).

We cannot afford to rule out any viable option to increase teen safety belt use. Some evidence suggests that reminder systems work for the general population; research is needed to identify if, and what types of reminders would work for teens.



Devices with the potential to increase belt use

- Reminder systems that flash and chime intermittently for up to five minutes or more if the driver or front seat passenger fails to buckle up (currently installed in many new vehicles).
- Devices that prevent radio play or lock transmissions if seat belts aren't worn (Surveys have found these devices would be unpopular with consumers).
- Reminder systems with lights and buzzers that intensify over time or as the vehicle gains speed.
- Aftermarket devices installed in the vehicle that monitor belt use by vehicle occupants. These devices are new and not yet widely available. They vary in design but could consist of audible or visual warnings, entertainment system interlocks and/or devices that record belt use or nonuse for later retrieval (Consumer interest in these devices is largely unknown; potential buyers include vehicle fleet administrators and parents who wish to monitor teen belt use).

Social Norms Marketing

Social norms theory maintains that a person's behavior is influenced by his or her perceptions of peer attitudes and behaviors: In other words, we are guided not only by our own desires but by what we think others expect of us.

This outlook could help encourage belt use in an entirely new way. Traditional safety belt campaigns emphasize the potential harm from not buckling up. Social norm programs take a different approach: They talk about how many people ARE buckling up and how that helps them.

This approach has been tried in Montana by Montana State University and an organization called Most of Us. The program was organized around a simple gap in knowledge: Even though eight of ten people were wearing safety belts, adults surveyed estimated only half their peers buckled up. For a year, the program raised awareness of the reality – that almost everyone buckles up. The result: Montanans' perceptions of belt use frequency increased significantly, correlating with improvements in reported belt use.

The same approach could work with teens. A recent survey in Montana showed teens believe a minority of their peers use belts even though most do. This common misperception may unintentionally fuel negative peer pressure. Increasing awareness of the true norm can offer teens a new benefit for buckling up – fitting in.

Adapted from The Social Norms Approach and Teen Safety Belt Use by Jeff Linkenbach, Ed.D. (currently under review at NHTSA)

communications& marketing

RECOMMENDATION #12

Paid advertising, which can increase the effectiveness of enforcement programs by informing the public that officers are actively enforcing safety belt laws, should be used to supplement enforcement efforts.

RECOMMENDATION #13

Because teens are particularly sensitive to the actions of their peers, social norms marketing may be an effective element of a comprehensive program to increase teen belt use. Program planners should consider including social norms messaging as an integral program component of teen belt use programs.

RECOMMENDATION #14

Paid and public service advertising with educational messaging alone is unlikely to increase belt use and should be avoided.

Being a teenager means searching for cues. Teens apply an analytical eye to all around them, sifting through the media clutter and scrutinizing peers, to gauge what's admired, what's accepted and what's considered hip. They are no longer passive listeners. They are critics.

Safety lessons and well-meaning warnings are met with a different calculus. What was once simply accepted faces a different type of analysis – what will my friends think? What do others my age do? What kind of autonomy might I be conceding?

Instead of falling victim to this new outlook, traffic safety programs should leverage it. Programs aimed at encouraging belt use can be designed as an exchange: If you wear your belt, you will get a benefit you seek, such as peer acceptance, love or admiration. It may be simply communicated in a message or demonstrated through some other type of intervention. This approach – designing a program to fit the needs and wants of the audience – is called social marketing.

One type of social marketing that may be especially helpful is taking advantage of social norms, the unspoken expectations people meet to fit in. Even if teen belt use is not as high as it should be, teens do buckle up most of the time. Wearing a safety belt is the norm. Communicating that norm can have a powerful effect on those who do not regularly wear safety belts.

In general, communications and marketing campaigns that aim to boost teen belt use will show better results if they are carefully designed to meet the wants and needs of teens, not simply share the outlook of those designing the program.

RECOMMENDATION #15

Peer-to-peer communications may have value as a component of comprehensive teen belt use programs but using peer-to-peer communications as a stand-alone approach should be avoided.

RECOMMENDATION #16

Teen belt use programs employing peers to communicate with other teens should consider basing these communications on social norms approaches.

Paid Advertising

Paid advertising using enforcement-related messages is a proven method of increasing belt use. In Click It or Ticket, paid ads boost the perception of enforcement, building greater awareness of the threat of getting pulled over and ticketed. To work best on teens, however, the advertising messages must be designed and placed with teen demographics in mind.

Paid advertising will be most effective if:

- It is viewed or heard by a large number of teens multiple times;
- Teens perceive the message as one targeting their generation;
- The message communicates a benefit teens value, such as the avoiding a likely traffic ticket and the associated consequences.

Paid advertising can be expensive, but it doesn't have to break the budget. Creative materials, including television and radio spots, are available for free from NHTSA and many state highway safety agencies. Some corporate and non-profit partners are sometimes willing to share costs. What's more, some medium and smaller media markets can be more affordable than some might expect. While earned media (news reporting) is less likely to get through to teens than well-crafted paid ads, earned media has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of enforcement efforts if it is placed in media that teens pay attention to.

Peer-to-peer Communication

As part of a teen belt campaign, peer-to-peer communication may be useful, but belt programs based solely on peer-to-peer education have not proved successful. Though peer programs have not shown belt-use increases, some appear to have had an effect on attitudes (Fell, 2005). Since most peer programs rely on self-assessment, it is difficult to measure effectiveness – some states report that programs increased belt use slightly. Despite the limitations, a "teen perspective" may be useful in designing interventions.

Based on experience with underage drinking efforts peer-led programs may offer more promise than peer-created programs. While consulting with teens (i.e., using focus groups) can help us gain insight into how teens think, programs solely developed by teens have not been proven effective.

Testing a New Approach: Service Learning

Meharry Medical College in Nashville, TN has two ongoing teen belt studies, one with a peer-to-peer component. Utilizing what is known as a service learning model students take the lead in showing other students how to successfully engage in activities to promote knowledge and awareness about relevant community, public health or safety issues. The programs will hopefully help students teach themselves about the importance of buckling up in fatality prevention.

One study involves an assessment of school-based, peer-to-peer learning initiatives in belt use. The study measures belt increases and attitude changes among students. Self-reported belt use increased during the first year of the study. Now in its third year, the study includes an evaluation with pre- and post-intervention observation near the schools.

-- Irwin Goldzweig, Meharry Medical College

LEVERAGING PEER INFLUENCE:

The DOs and the DON'Ts

DO
DO Identify True Peers. True peers are those people with whom a target group identifies. Peer groups are complex and varied, and goes beyond simple issues like age, school or gender.
DO Provide a Legitimate Role for Involvement. Young people can play meaningful roles in prevention program development if given the chance. Just like adults, they are eager to make a difference in their social world. It is key that their involvement be legitimate and meaningful.
DO Involve Peers as Advocates. Young people can mobilize the media . Their very presence helps frame important policy debates and they are credible.
DO Look Ahead. Young people look at where they are going—often several years ahead.
DO Conduct Cost-Benefit Analysis. It is critical that project directors use data to conduct cost-benefit analyses of peer program outcomes. It takes an incredible amount of resources to mentor young people to achieve project outcomes. However, research consistently demonstrates that the people who best benefit from peer programs are the peer programmers themselves.
DO Stay Positive and Piggy-Back Efforts. Peer programs should maintain a positive focus for maximum effectiveness. Reframe your goals from being *against* harm to being *for* something healthy. Broaden the focus of your efforts so that resources can piggy back and be shared across programs. Infuse new peer programs into already existent venues.
DO Use Data to Empower. Teens are excited to uncover and promote the untold goodness of their peers. They like being part of an agenda that empowers themselves and others by using data to correct misperceptions of norms and set the record straight.

It's true: As teens get older, they increasingly take cues from peers instead of parents. Peers help define what's cool, what's respected and, most of all, what's accepted. But think back to your own high school days: Kids are not really paying attention to everyone their same age, just to some of the kids —the ones they identify the most closely with. Yesterday's nerds and geeks were never the true peers of the jocks and cheerleaders. Today, the titles have changed, but the dynamic hasn't. Successful peer involvement programs tune into these subtleties. Here are a handful of do's and don'ts to consider.

-- Jeffrey W. Linkenbach, Ed.D.

DON'T

DON'T Assume Peers = Same Age. It is wrong to assume that all peers are credible messengers to all other people their age.

DON'T develop "token peer programs" that *use* young people to accomplish adult aims. Such a tactic is both disrespectful and ineffective. Do not assume that a teen agenda is addressed simply by having a teen in the room or on a committee.

DON'T Use Peers as Educators Alone. Education is critical to any prevention effort, but research demonstrates that information-only approaches do not work. Avoid involving peers solely as disseminators of health information. Use them as catalysts to change their environment.

DON'T assume that peers are always looking across the classroom at people their same age.

DON'T Assume That Good Intentions = Good Outcomes. A common mistake is to assume that because a program has worthy goals and benefits the small number of teens involved that it is worth maintaining. This logic may or may not be valid when viewed against project aims. Make sure to link peer interventions with long term outcomes.

DON'T Get Negative or Isolated. It is difficult to recruit and sustain programs based only "anti" messages without positive elements. "Anti" message projects are often narrow and isolate specific issues. It is much more difficult to recruit and retain teens with negative anti-messages

DON'T Use Data to Oppress. Peers are not motivated to be involved with prevention efforts when they are seen as the "harbingers of doom." They want to portray good news about youth social norms but must be given the data and platform to do so.

Creating Effective Local Programs: Where to Start

Some quick tips when creating a comprehensive teen belt program:

» Don't reinvent the wheel. Look first at what has worked elsewhere through a literature search and contacting others who have worked on the issue. Start with this guide and the recent comprehensive literature review referenced in this report.

» Monitor and evaluate what you're doing; use what you find to adjust the program to maximize effectiveness.

» Always consider local and cultural factors.

» Remember that effective programs almost always utilize multifaceted approaches.

» Research indicates that buckle up contracts or pledges must be accompanied with follow-up incentives or enforcement to have any effect.

» While some safety belt competitions and contests with incentives have resulted in short-term belt use increases, it's unclear if such increases can be sustained. Thus, these activities might be most appropriate as components of a more comprehensive program.

(Fell,2005)

RECOMMENDATION #17

To be most successful a teen belt use program should have multiple components including communications and enforcement. Single-faceted program designs are unlikely to increase belt use and should be avoided. The program should include an evaluation plan to determine if it was successful in increasing teen belt use.

RECOMMENDATION #18

Small organizations or communities might consider combining teen belt programs with other youth programs such as underage drinking to achieve maximum results with a minimum investment.

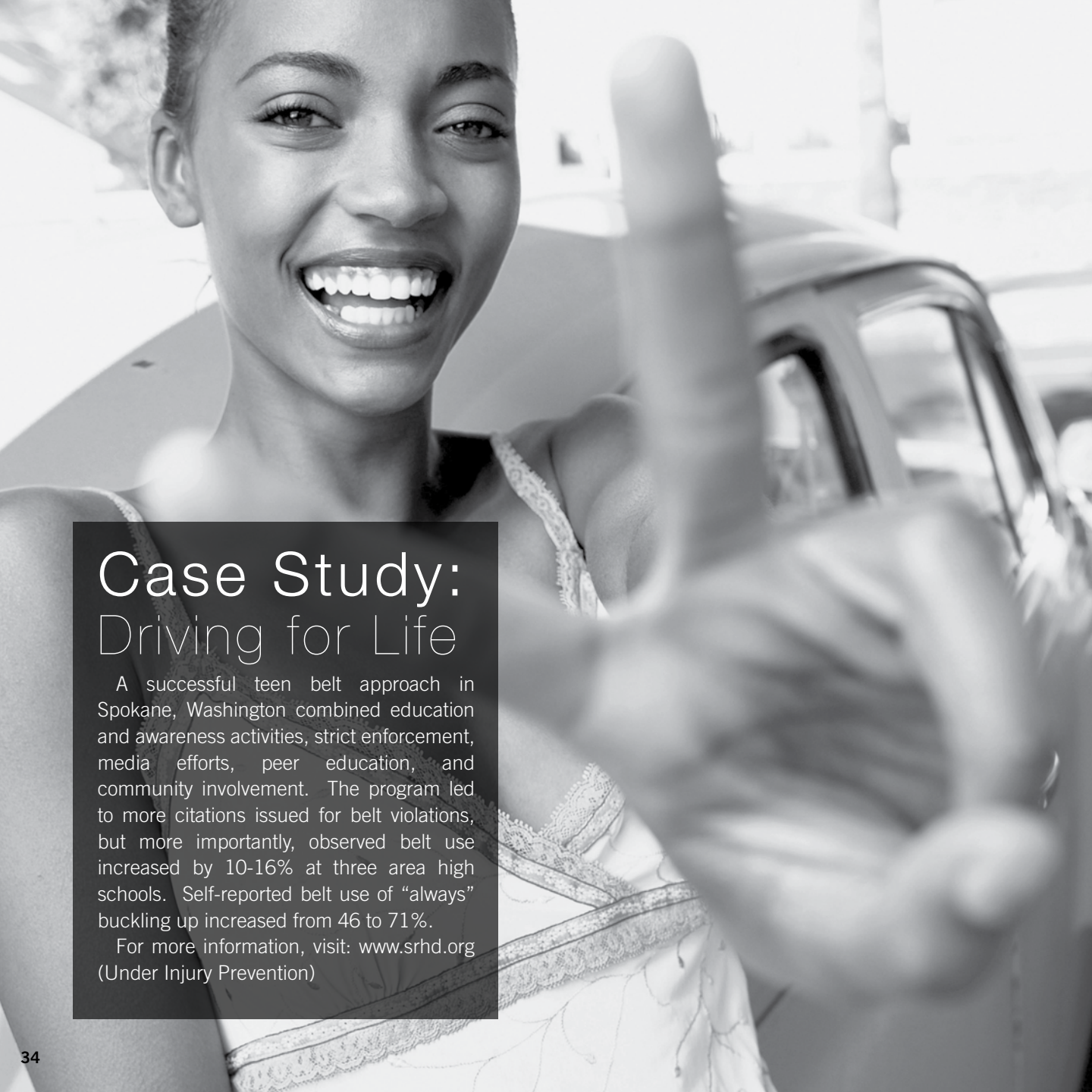
comprehensive strategies

Usually the best approach is to try multiple approaches.

For example, communication campaigns can build awareness while enforcement efforts and school-based programs impact on-the-ground reality. In the commercial sector, this is called integrated marketing – addressing consumers' wants and needs from many directions, all directed about one behavior. The uniting force is a shared focus on the bottom line: How many teens are buckling up?

Local Program Strategies

"A community program including education, diversity outreach, highly publicized enforcement, and parental involvement would likely have a substantial effect on teen belt use. However, these strategies would probably need to be sustained for the effect to last over time. While each strategy is not without barriers, careful planning, implementation and evaluation can result in effective programs and add greatly to our knowledge of teen safety belt use." (Fell, 2005)



Case Study:
Driving for Life

A successful teen belt approach in Spokane, Washington combined education and awareness activities, strict enforcement, media efforts, peer education, and community involvement. The program led to more citations issued for belt violations, but more importantly, observed belt use increased by 10-16% at three area high schools. Self-reported belt use of "always" buckling up increased from 46 to 71%.

For more information, visit: www.srhd.org (Under Injury Prevention)

How to Maximize Resources

Increasing teen belt use is no small task – just as multiple approaches are more likely to work than only one, the greater investment you have from the community, the greater impact you are likely to have. One of the best ways to maximize community resources is to build a coalition of support -- either a formal or informal network of individuals and organizations encouraging young drivers to buckle up.

And the more diverse and broad the representation the better. The goal is to have teens hear about the importance of safety belts as often as possible, from as many people as possible, and in as many places as possible. Within a coalition, members can share various skills, knowledge and resources.

A community alliance may include:

» State, regional and local traffic safety leaders

» State agencies (Dept. of Education, Health, etc.): Safety activities/campaigns, promote activities through agency venues, communicate partnership/funding opportunities.

» Representatives from the medical community (doctors, nurses, EMTs, etc.)

» Representatives from the law enforcement community: Enforcement of belt laws, promoting belt use for teens in interviews with the media/ press or speaking with students at school events.

» Community service or voluntary organizations: (Kiwanis, Rotary International, Jaycees)

» Parents/consumer groups: (PTA, National Parents Association)

» Business owners: Donation of services/goods/ coupons or sponsorship for an event.

» Educators/school administrators: Link with school systems to conduct activities in high schools, send letters to parents/caregivers, implement safety curriculums or toolkits, and require belt use on school property.

» Religious organizations or leaders: Promotion of teen belt use in youth groups, sermons/ services or programs.

» Political leaders: Work on legislation to improve GDL laws, such as including sanctions for non-use of belts while in GDL.

research & evaluation

RECOMMENDATION #19

Currently available observational usage data for teens are scarce and not sufficiently detailed. Ways to measure belt use by specific year of age, seating position, urban-rural location and other factors should also be explored.

RECOMMENDATION #20

Evaluate the impact of penalties – fines, penalty points and GDL-related sanctions - on teen belt use.

RECOMMENDATION #21

Conduct and evaluate the effect of a comprehensive school-based belt use pilot program in a community with relatively low belt use.

Elements of such a program should include a school parking/driving policy that includes student drivers, their teen passengers and strong penalties for non-compliance.

Enforcement of the parking/driving policy on school property and enforcement of the state belt law off school property should be integral components of the program.

RECOMMENDATION #22

Conduct additional research to better understand the acceptability and effectiveness of belt interlocks and monitoring systems as well as the effect of belt reminder systems on teen belt use.

RECOMMENDATION #23

Conduct and evaluate a teen belt use pilot program based on extensive parental oversight and involvement, including establishing and enforcing belt use rules and in-vehicle monitoring.

To plan effective teen belt programs, we need information on what works. We know 15-19 year olds respond differently to messages, but just how differently? Current data systems simply do not provide enough adolescent-specific information. And many relevant surveys and evaluations collect information only for broad age groups. Beyond data issues, the capacity to conduct small-scale trials of new ideas is critical; promising concepts need to be tried and assessed prior to broad implementation.

Research: Testing & Evaluating New Concepts

A recent Insurance Institute for Highway Safety study evaluated a potential school-based strategy to increase belt use among teens: Incorporating a belt use requirement into a school parking permit system. A belt use policy is promising as driving to school is a valued teen privilege, a convenience to many parents, and many schools are accustomed to enforcing basic traffic rules. Increasing belt use to and from school is particularly important as teen crashes frequently occur during these hours. The effects of a school policy were evaluated in the 2003-2004 academic year at high schools in Connecticut (with primary enforcement and generally high belt use rates) and Mississippi (with secondary enforcement and generally low belt use rates). The study suggests such a policy could be successful, especially in schools with low belt use.

» To achieve maximum effect, policies must be consistently enforced and provide meaningful penalties, including the loss of parking privileges for repeat violators.

» Schools need adequate resources and commitment to implement, enforce, and sustain the strong policy needed to maintain rates -- support from parents and school officials is critical to success.

» Schools should work closely with local law enforcement agencies to conduct enforcement activities near schools.

For more details on how to implement a belt policy at schools in your area or to read this study in its entirety, contact: publications@iihs.org. (McCartt, 2005)

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APPENDIX

Resources

For information on teen traffic safety, research, tips and other resources, please check the following websites.

Increasing Teen Safety Belt Use: A Program and Literature Review
www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/NewDriver/TeenBeltUse/

National Safety Council's *Teen Driver: A Family Guide to Teen Driver Safety*
Copies can be purchased at www.nsc.org. The guide can also be found at: www.gm.com/company/gmability/safety/drivers_seat/teen_driving/index.html

Countermeasures That Work
www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/airbags/Countermeasures/index.htm

***The Allstate Foundation's Chronic:* A Report on the State of Teen Driving 2005**
www.allstate.com/Community/Documents/chronic.pdf

Buckle Up America Strategy Booklet
www.buckleupamerica.org/strategy/social_marketing/index.htm

CDC Activities
www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/teenmvhactivities.htm

The Guide to Community Preventative Services
www.thecommunityguide.org/mvoi/default.htm

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety
www.iihs.org/research/topics/teenagers.html

Adolescent Development Web Sites

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.
www.aacap.org

American Academy of Pediatrics.
www.aap.org.

Healthy Youth Development Prevention Research Center. University of Minnesota.
www.med.umn.edu/peds/gpah/cfahad/prc.html

Medline. A medical library created by the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health
medlineplus.gov

The National Adolescent Health Information Center. University of California, San Francisco.
nahic.ucsf.edu

National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child

The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
www.cdc.goc/ncipc

Evaluation Resources:

The Art of Appropriate Evaluation: A Guide for Highway Safety Program Managers
http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/research/ArtofAppEvWeb/index.htm

Demonstrating Your Programs Worth: A Primer for Evaluation on Programs to Prevent Unintentional Injury
http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/demonstr.htm

Links to Other Risk Area Research

Connect for Kids
Works as a clearinghouse for research, information for kids, teens and parents.
http://www.connectforkids.org

National Academies
http://www.nationalacademies.org/

The Bare Essentials of Monitoring and Evaluation

Unless you measure your impact, you have no idea what you're doing. Monitoring and evaluation are not expensive extras. They lie at the core of any behavior-change effort, the means for guiding an ongoing program or measuring the impact of a pilot.

Want to get teens to buckle up? You need some information to know what to do: What portion of teens wear safety belts? How many buckle up when driving alone vs. with an adult? Why not more?

Unless you measure what teens are doing and why, you won't know what is needed or even if you're pushing in the right direction. In one example, early college campaigns against binge drinking graphically warned students against the dangers of such practices as "funneling." It took evaluation measures to show this approach wasn't just ineffective; by demonstrating a rite of passage, it appeared to be encouraging the practice it was attempting to stop.

It doesn't have to be difficult. You can steer your teen traffic safety effort by remembering the 3 M's of evaluation:

1. Measure everything you can. How many teens, parents or others are attending your events, receiving your messages or otherwise experiencing your program? What do they say they're doing? What are you observing? What else is changing? The simplest ways to measure what's happening in a teen safety belt program are:

- Observational surveys of teens
- Individual or group qualitative interviews, such as focus groups, with teens
- Measures of exposure (number of people who see, hear or experience some part of the intervention).

2. Monitor what's happening. One measure is helpful. Two can show a trend. Measure what's happening throughout your program, not just once. Look for trends and relationships between what you're doing and what teens are doing or thinking.

3. Meet about your findings. Monitoring is only useful if the insights are fed back into the program. If your program is not changing regularly based on research, it's probably going off track.

A basic teen safety belt monitoring and evaluation plan might include the following:

Step 1. PRE-INTERVENTION SURVEY. Survey the people you want to change (teens in the area you are working). A sample of 400 will give you a reasonable 5% margin of error. You can also supplement this research with qualitative research, such as focus groups, and other measures, such as observing safety belt use in a methodical way.

Step 2. USE YOUR INITIAL RESEARCH TO SHAPE YOUR PROGRAM. Work with a marketing or research professional to analyze the results for useful insights that can help guide your effort.

Step 3. CREATE A "LOGIC MODEL" showing how your work is supposed to influence teens. Simply break down your logic into individual steps – if we do this, teens will do that. You want to try and measure each step in your logic: For example, are teens hearing what you think they're hearing? Are they thinking what you hope they are? Are they doing what you want?

Step 4. MONITOR EVERY OUTPUT you can during the intervention. How much of your target audience is seeing, hearing or otherwise experiencingyour intervention? How much are you distributing? How many other changes are you making?

Step 5. POST-INTERVENTION SURVEY. Survey another cross-section of teens in the same way you did before the intervention. You can use the survey form and supplement this, if possible, with qualitative research, such as focus groups, as well as other sources of information, such as safety belt observational research.

Step 6. ANALYZE THE RESULTS. Using your logic model compare what you found to what you expected. What is bringing about the changes you want? Where is the process breaking down? What program changes might make the process work better?

The quality and accuracy of the research and resulting insights will improve if one employs professionals. Advice from an evaluation expert, especially on how you gather and examine data, is probably essential. But with help, many organizations can perform much of this work themselves. The results are well worth the investment. It is the only way to know if what you are doing is helping.

Conducting Informal Observational Surveys of Safety Belt Use

Quick and easy to do, informal surveys of safety belt use can be useful for indicating general trends in seat belt use in specific areas. It is customary to count 100 vehicles at each site for these informal surveys. However, in lower traffic areas it is acceptable to observe for forty minutes at each site and calculate the percentage of use in the vehicles seen during that time. See tip 6 for the number of different sites at which to do a survey.

Here are a few key points and tips on informal surveys of safety belt use:

1. The surveys do not have to be done by licensed officers. Explorer scouts, reserve officers, and traffic safety advocates are all potential observers.

2. It is very important to observe at the same location or locations each time you conduct the survey. Your rates for different time periods will be comparable if you do so. Therefore, it is best to plan ahead where you will be observing, what time the observing will begin, and whether the observing will be done on a weekday or weekend. Keep a copy of your plan and follow it each time you survey.

3. Observe only the shoulder belt use of the driver. Only a few older vehicles will have just lap belts in the front seat; these will be counted as unbelted. It is much more practical to try to spot shoulder belt use/non-use than lap belt use/non-use.

4. Observe drivers in all passenger vehicles: cars, pick up trucks, vans, and recreational vehicles.

5. It is often preferable to observe the traffic going only in the direction that passes closest to the observer; again it is much easier to spot belt use/non-use in close vehicles. If 100 vehicles have not been seen after 40 minutes have passed, the survey can still be considered complete.

6. The selection of sites is up to you. Most informal surveys are done on relatively high traffic roadways. If the population over which you have jurisdiction is less than 20,000 a minimum of three sites is best. If the population is over 20,000 a minimum of five sites is best. At each site, observe either 100 drivers or as many as pass in forty minutes. Change to a new survey form when you change sites.

7. Since this type of survey is informal, it is best used to compare the rates over time and use them as an indicator of general trends in seat belt use. Formal use surveys include hundreds of sites on all types of roadways and statistical weighting techniques; informal surveys shouldn't be expected to show results comparable with formal ones.

8. Report your findings to the press, being careful to explain it is an informal survey. Has use gone up or down and by how much? Is there one location that always has higher seat belt use? How does your rate compare with a neighboring community's rate? Can you find an electronic message board to report the use rate? Will the schools in your area participate in a competition to see which has the highest rate?

- Minnesota Department of Public Safety

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National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

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Steve Davis
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Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety

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MOST of Us, Montana State University

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